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RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ DEC 7552
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 3040
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 3638
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 3391
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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 012022

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/29/2105
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: FARC ATTACK KILLS 29; MILITARY CONCEDES ERRORS

REF: BOGOTA 11862

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood
Reason: 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

1. (C) The FARC killed 29 Colombian soldiers from the counter-guerrilla 12th Mobile Brigade in a December 27 attack about 105 miles south of Bogota, one of the highest casualty figures in a single attack during President Uribe's term. Colombian intelligence officials suggest the 12th Mobile Brigade may have made "serious tactical errors" that caused the high casualty figures. The Colombian military had good intelligence on FARC movements, but apparently did not take standard precautions. The FARC, on the other hand, also had good intelligence and executed its attack efficiently. A respected think tank reported that FARC attacks in 2005 are actually down over 2004 figures, but attacks in recent months have pushed 2005 casualty numbers to about 300, significantly higher than 2004's 212 figure. Intelligence officials said the FARC likely wanted to send a message to Uribe that it would fight for what it regarded as important (its drug growing haven) and to the Colombian people that Uribe's democratic security approach was failing. Uribe promised December 28 to take the fight to the FARC and to eradicate manually every last leaf of coca that the FARC had sown in a national park close to the area of the attack. End summary.

FARC Attack Kills 29

2. (C) A FARC attack about 105 miles south of Bogota near the village of Vista Hermosa, Meta Department, lasted about three hours on December 27 and resulted in the deaths of 29 of an 80-strong Colombian military counter-guerrilla unit assigned to protect manual eradication teams. The area is a longtime FARC stronghold that formed part of President Pastrana's "despeje" (the zone that became a FARC "province") and remains a key FARC narcotics growing region. According to members of the Colombian Joint Intelligence Center, elements of the FARC's 40th, 27th, and 7th fronts (Eastern Bloc, at least 220 guerrillas) launched the attack on elements of the Colombian Army 12th Mobile Brigade at about 10430. The Colombian military reported five FARC casualties. A senior Colombian Intelligence Officer told DAO there had been some indications prior to the attack of FARC "massing" in the area. The commander of the armed forces said in a December 29 radio interview that the 12th Mobile Brigade was

in the area precisely because of such reports. He said a captain moved with elements of the 12th Mobile Brigade towards the sound of shots on the 27th, intending to protect the civilian population from what he thought was a FARC attack on them. When the captain and his men arrived at the location from where the shots came, they realized that the shots had most likely lured them to the area and that they were close to a minefield and severely outnumbered. Initial accounts are that the FARC attacked with cylinder bombs and .50 caliber machine guns. The FARC attack stopped at approximately 0730 upon the arrival of Colombian air force support.

13. (C) A senior Colombian army intelligence official said on December 29 the 12th Mobile Brigade made "serious tactical errors" that contributed to the high casualty numbers. According to the official, the FARC had good intelligence on the movements of the Brigade because the area is replete with FARC militia. The official acknowledged that the military had good intelligence on FARC intentions, but could not explain why it was apparently not acted upon.

Attack Ranks with Worst in Uribe Presidency

14. (C) Analysts have characterized the 29 deaths as the worst single attack on the military since Uribe assumed office in May 2002. According to the respected think tank, Security and Democracy Foundation, FARC attacks in 2005 totaled 342, a 12 percent decrease over 2004 figures. The latest FARC attacks push 2005 casualties to about 300, significantly above 2004's 212 victims. The most recent attack prior to December 27 was on December 17, when FARC and ELN guerrillas killed eight auxiliary police officers in San Marino, Choco Department, and took 29 hostages, who were later released unharmed (reftel).

Uribe Announces Measures

15. (C) Following a GOC National Security Council meeting on December 28, Uribe said he would concentrate all 60 manual eradication teams by January 20 in the Macarena National Park, close to the site of the FARC massacre, to eradicate the park's approximately 4,000 hectares of FARC coca fields. Uribe has assigned the Colombian National Police the task of providing security for what will be almost 2,000 manual eradicators, while the military will be coordinating counter-guerrilla operations. Uribe said the areas surrounding Vista Hermosa were FARC sanctuaries and the GOC would go after FARC militia members operating there, and promised to accelerate the delivery of pension and other benefits to victims' families. The president noted that the GOC had manually eradicated 31,000 hectares of coca fields in 2005 and cleared 3,650 coca pickers from the area surrounding Macarena. He announced a "reinforced" reward system designed to obtain information leading to the arrest of the perpetrators.

16. (C) Uribe said the FARC had "totally violated" Colombia's national parks by sowing coca. He said the GOC had accepted an international commission proposal to establish a security zone to conduct GOC-FARC talks on a humanitarian exchange of hostages, but the FARC's ("miserable terrorists financed by narcotics trafficking") only response has been violence.

Military Reaction

17. (C) The military's reaction thus far has been calm, but concerned (septel will provide a broader analysis of the military balance at the end of 2005). Intelligence officials told us they expect brigade commanders to be instructed to pay closer attention to intelligence reports and to reinforce the importance of following established counter-guerrilla

procedures in the field and not letting down the guard during holiday breaks. Further military reaction will depend to a large extent on how Uribe handles the matter; public criticism of military failings would lower morale, they said.

Political Intentions

18. (C) Intelligence officials suggest the FARC wanted to send a message to the Colombian people as they approach an election year: we are not defeated and can still strike close to Bogota. They also said the FARC wanted to reinforce that it will fight hard for what it regards as important; it believes the area of the attack is its territory, which perhaps motivated the attack, since the GOC was recently manually eradicating in the area.

Comment

19. (C) President Uribe has chewed out all military and police commanders. We are concerned that the augmentation of manual eradication efforts in the Macarena will put personnel at risk of attack and landmines, will divert already stretched police assets to protect them, and will also divert scarce logistics resources. We have offered to spray in the Macarena in lieu of manual eradication and are awaiting a response.

WOOD